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By William H. McMichael

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The lack of a full estimate for fiscal 2009 war costs and funding for ship and aviation modernization dominated two congressional hearings on the proposed defense budget last week.

Although military pay and health care costs would eat up 29 percent of the \$515.4 billion budget plan, there was little talk in either hearing about personnel programs — other than the \$8.7 billion requested to grow the Army and Marine Corps.

The \$515.4 billion total does not include war spending, for which the Pentagon has requested \$70 billion, a figure that could grow by another \$100 billion after a new administration takes office in January.

However, Rep. John Murtha, D-Pa., pointed out during a Feb. 13 hearing of the House Appropriations subcommittee on Defense that while the baseline budget would rise 7.5 percent, by \$35.9 billion over the current fiscal year, Defense officials want to cut funding for family programs.

“Thirty-nine percent less ... for the programs we added last year, taking care of counseling, taking care of children in the schools and so forth,” said Murtha, chairman of the powerful subcommittee.

One example, he said, is Family Advocacy and Assistance, a program that coordinates efforts to “prevent, identify, report and treat all aspects” of spouse and child abuse and child neglect, according to the Pentagon.

In fiscal 2007, \$385 million was ultimately spent on the program. The following year, the Pentagon asked for much less — \$233 million — but Congress approved a far larger amount, \$401 million. For fiscal 2009, the Pentagon is seeking \$244 million.

In addition, the Pentagon has underfunded military health care for the third consecutive year — this time by \$1.2 billion — in the hope that Congress will approve a variety of fee hikes for Tricare Standard and Prime for retirees under age 65.

The budget plan contains no funding at all for the family-friendly initiatives proposed by President Bush in his January State of the Union address.

The Military Community Incentive Program, as the Defense Department calls it, would allow troops to transfer unused Montgomery G.I. Bill education benefits to family members; expand job training and opportunities for military spouses, to include preference for federal job openings; and expand child care through joint ventures with local communities.

Defense officials say they will submit separate legislative proposals to pay for the incentives.

"We're working through that," Pentagon Comptroller Tina Jonas said in a brief interview after the hearing. She declined to provide a cost estimate, saying it would depend on how the program is crafted. But it would probably be more than \$1 billion, she said.

Murtha said he will work to ensure the committee will once again trump the Pentagon request for Family Advocacy funding — and fully fund other family programs as well.

"Every program that helps the families, we're going to continue," Murtha said afterward.

"Tricare, we're going to take care of; the Family Advocacy Program ... that's going to be there. We know how important that is to the troops overseas."

A recent visit to the Middle East underscored the importance of such programs, he said. "When I was in Afghanistan just last weekend, the commander said, 'We worry about the families.' As you know, that's the major concern of these troops: Are their families being taken care of?"

"So we keep putting money in, trying to make sure they have what they need, and we hope the department will understand that those are a priority with us, not only the troops in the field, but the families themselves," Murtha said. "We'll add that money back, or at least I'll make that recommendation to the subcommittee."

From a broader perspective, however, Murtha acknowledged that the rising cost of national defense is becoming untenable. The problem isn't family programs, he said, but rather the tension between the administration's war in Iraq and resetting a force with tired ground troops and aging equipment.

Strategic modernization would take the biggest chunk of the 2009 budget, with the Pentagon proposing to spend \$183.8 billion, or 35 percent of the total request. Nearly 25 percent of the modernization funds, \$45.6 billion, would go to replace aging aircraft, while \$16.8 billion would be spent on new ships.

"The Defense Department must look beyond Iraq to the long-term threats that we face," Murtha said during a speech at a Feb. 12 defense conference. "We can't buy everything. ... I'm challenging the military to determine where it is prudent to take short-term [budget] risks. I worry about the readiness of the country to respond to a future threat."

That's especially important because defense spending, in Murtha's estimation, will not continue to rise.

“When the next president comes in ... there’s going to be a cutback in defense spending because of the demand on domestic spending,” he predicted following the Feb. 13 hearing.

Murtha, who initially supported the invasion of Iraq before becoming an ardent opponent, said continuing to draw down the force there could eliminate the need for an increase in spending the following fiscal year.

“I see that as part of the way that we help to solve the problem of doing the procurement necessary to upgrade the forces and take care of the readiness problem,” Murtha said.